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**ATTORNEY GENERAL JOHN ASHCROFT, LABOR SECRETARY ELAINE L. CHAO SIGN
AGREEMENT IMPROVING JOB PROTECTION FOR RETURNING GUARDSMEN AND RESERVISTS**

WASHINGTON, DC - Attorney General John Ashcroft and Labor Secretary Elaine L. Chao have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to ensure that the employment rights of men and women returning from military service are vigorously protected. Specifically, the MOU streamlines and strengthens enforcement of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA). Congress passed USERRA to safeguard the employment rights and benefits of service members upon their return to civilian life.

"The brave men and women protected by USERRA voluntarily set aside the comforts of civilian life and stepped in harm's way," said Attorney General Ashcroft. "We owe it to them to make sure that their employment rights and protections are fully and vigorously protected upon their return from military service. USERRA and today's agreement reflect the highest virtues of civic responsibility."

"Our military men and women have been there for us, so now it's our turn to step up our efforts for them," Labor Secretary Elaine L. Chao said. "This agreement will strengthen enforcement of USERRA by ensuring faster resolution of USERRA cases and quicker enforcement action by the government when it is necessary."

The MOU deals exclusively with each Department's role and responsibilities in the enforcement of USERRA. The Attorney General has delegated his USERRA responsibilities to the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice and the U.S. Attorneys' offices. USERRA will now be enforced by the Civil Rights Division along with other employment-related civil rights statutes. The Department of Labor has delegated its USERRA responsibilities to the Veterans' Employment and Training Service and the Office of the Solicitor.

The MOU will streamline the enforcement process, allowing the two agencies to work closely and effectively to ensure the protection of USERRA rights. Specifically, under the MOU, when a complaint raises an issue of immediate and significant harm, and each agency concurs that the complaint appears meritorious, it may be referred for enforcement immediately. This will eliminate duplicative factual inquiry and legal analysis by the two agencies, expediting

the seeking of appropriate relief for the returning service member.

DOL last week also issued new regulations strengthening USERRA protections. In addition to the new regulations, Secretary Chao and the DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Services (VETS) have taken other steps to reduce the rate of USERRA violations, including:

- Providing briefings to more than 158,000 service members and others on USERRA;
- Responding to almost 26,000 requests for technical assistance;
- Distributing more than 240 televised public service announcements, with a second announcement to be released shortly; and
- Addressing most of the major human resource and employer organizations.

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